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# Plurilingualism, pluriculturalism, and the CEFR: Are Turkey's foreign language objectives reflected in classroom instruction?

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## Abstract

The development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence is increasingly noted as an important goal of foreign language education. Consequently, the Turkish Ministry of National Education has emphasized the integration of these principles into the nation's foreign language curriculum. However, little has been done to determine whether these ideas are successfully implemented on a practical level. To address this omission, the researcher investigated the views of Turkish teachers of English as a Foreign Language concerning plurilingual and pluricultural competence, using a series of open-ended survey questions to explore their understanding of its implications and whether they believe the standardized curriculum truly makes room for developing these skills. The results revealed that the respondents lacked familiarity with these concepts; and while they believed that intercultural competence is important, they did not feel that the standardized English language curriculum supports this approach.

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## 1. Introduction

In accordance with the objectives of the Council of Europe (CoE), an international body which supports the development of a pan-European community through the advancement of intercultural

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understanding and appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity (Girard & Trim, 1998), the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Teaching, Learning and Assessment (CEFR)* was created in order to establish international standards for foreign language education (CoE, 2001). The principles of the *CEFR*, which hold plurilingual and pluricultural competence to be the ultimate goals of language learning, have been adopted throughout CoE member nations and beyond as a basis for foreign language instruction (Khalifa & French, 2008).

### *1.1. Plurilingualism and Pluriculturalism*

The *CEFR* defines plurilingualism as the ability of an individual who is competent in more than one language to switch easily from one linguistic code to another in order to communicate effectively within a particular set of circumstances (CoE, 2001). Unlike bilingual or multilingual contexts, where one language may be viewed as superior to another, plurilingualism requires that no one language code is given importance at the expense of any other (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009). As Coste et al. note, examples of plurilingualism can be found in regions of Spain, where Catalan is commonly spoken in addition to Castilian Spanish; or in Luxembourg, where residents may transition from French to German to Letzeburgisch, all of which have equal status as national languages. It is important to point out the distinction between plurilingualism and multilingualism, which simply denotes “the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society” (CoE, 2001, p. 4).

Furthermore, pluriculturalism is considered to be a natural outcome of plurilingualism. The *CEFR* asserts that pluriculturalism develops when “linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness” (CoE, 2001, p. 43), enabling the individual “to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences” (p. 43). As a result, the individual is able to navigate successfully across a range of cultural contexts, and in doing so, develops a new and unique identity which is not constrained by a single cultural perspective. Coste et al. (2009) observe that multiculturalism is distinguished from pluriculturalism, with multicultural societies comprising separate groups that exhibit unique cultural characteristics; while in the case of pluriculturalism, multiple individuals from diverse backgrounds identify with multiple cultural groups.

### *1.2. The European Language Portfolio*

In light of the *CEFR*’s objective of promoting plurilingual and pluricultural competence on an international level, the European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed as a substantive resource for coordinating language learning activities (CoE, 2011). Based on the understanding that successful mastery of language skills depends in large part on learner autonomy, the ELP serves as an ongoing record of language learning, encouraging learners to document their progress and providing a space for self-assessment, as well as instructor feedback. As Mirici (2008) explains, the ELP allows learners “to monitor their own learning process on a life-long basis as well as to develop respect for cultural identities and diversity” (p. 26).

### *1.3. Adoption and Implementation of the CEFR and the ELP in the Turkish Context*

Since becoming a member of the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1949, the Turkish Republic has closely aligned its educational policies with those of its European counterparts, stressing proficiency in foreign languages, particularly English, as a top priority of education (MoNE, 2005). Accordingly, with the adoption of the *CEFR* in the early 2000s, the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has

emphasized plurilingualism and pluriculturalism as desired outcomes of foreign language learning (Mirici, 2008). Furthermore, as Mirici relates, a Turkish adaptation of the ELP was designed, following the recommendation of the 20th Session of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe, held in October, 2000, that member states “implement or create conditions favorable for the implementation and wide use of the ELP” (p. 27). While the initial Turkish adaptation was piloted in a number of private elementary and secondary schools in Istanbul, the intention of the MoNE was for this language dossier to be accessible by all language learners nationwide. Accordingly, the current version of the Turkish ELP [Avrupa Dil Portfolyosu] has been made freely available through the MoNE website at [www.meb.gov.tr](http://www.meb.gov.tr).

## 2. Purpose of the Study

In light of Turkey’s stated aims of integrating the principles of the *CEFR* and the ELP into foreign language instruction (Mirici, 2008), and its recent measures to include these objectives in the national foreign language curriculum (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Güler, 2005), the researcher took the stance that the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence should be fostered from the earliest stages of language education and that use of the European Language Portfolio should be promoted in the classroom from the onset of foreign language instruction. However, little attention has been given to determining whether foreign language teachers in public elementary schools are in fact aware of these issues, understand their implications, or make efforts to incorporate them in their teaching. Therefore, in an attempt to shed light on the current status of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in the Turkish foreign language classroom, the investigator designed this study to answer the following research questions:

1. Are elementary-level language instructors in Turkey familiar with the concepts of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism; and if so, do they understand their implications?
2. Do foreign language teachers see a place for plurilingual and pluricultural competence in the Turkish foreign language classroom?
3. What measures, if any, do language teachers implement in line with the MoNE’s goal of developing plurilingual and pluricultural competence in Turkey’s students?
4. Are Turkish foreign language instructors familiar with the ELP, and if so, do they incorporate it in their teaching?

## 3. Methodology

Because the researcher wished to explore the understanding of the respondents concerning the topic under investigation, a qualitative research design was employed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008) in order to conduct an in-depth examination of the participants’ reactions in relation to the issues of plurilingual and pluricultural competence. Furthermore, as his objective was to draw attention to the practical ability of elementary-level language instructors to integrate these concepts into their teaching, a case study design was utilized, drawing on several sources of data within a bounded context in order to develop a clear picture of the present circumstances (Creswell, 2007).

### 3.1. Setting and Participants

The sampling method for this study was purposive, as the researcher wished to confine his focus to the respondents from whom the most relevant information could be obtained in relation to the topic of inquiry (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). Accordingly, the researcher invited 5 Turkish instructors of English as a foreign language working at a state-run elementary school to participate in this study. The participants

were informed of the purpose of the investigation, and their voluntary written consent was obtained before the onset of the data collection process.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Because the researcher's goal was to obtain detailed information on the participants' understanding of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism and whether they applied these concepts in their teaching, the data were collected via a survey consisting of open-ended questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) which were designed to elicit thoughtful responses. Accordingly, the researcher distributed a list of questions to each of the participants and asked them to provide detailed and reflective written answers (Allett, Keightly, & Pickering, 2011). In anticipation of the probability that at least some of the participants would not be familiar with the concepts of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, definitions and examples were provided (see Appendix A). All of the participants were given the same list of questions, which are outlined below:

1. Are you familiar with the terms “plurilingualism” and “pluriculturalism?” If so, what is your understanding of their meaning?
2. If you are familiar with these concepts, where did you first learn about them? (i.e., through teacher training or development programs; independent reading of related literature; academic conferences or seminars; etc.).
3. Do you feel that the standardized EFL curriculum you use in your teaching encompasses plurilingualism and pluriculturalism based on your understanding of these terms? Please elaborate.
4. What do you do in the course of your teaching to promote the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence in your students?
5. What is your opinion concerning your students' responses to activities designed to foster plurilingualism and pluriculturalism?
6. Do you think that plurilingual and pluricultural competence are important skills in today's society in general? Why or why not?
7. Do you think that plurilingualism and pluriculturalism are applicable in the Turkish context? Please explain your answer.
8. Are you familiar with the Turkish adaptation of the European Language Portfolio (ELP)? If so, how would you characterize it?
9. Do you think that the current English language teaching curriculum makes room for the use of the ELP? Please explain.
10. Do you use the Turkish version of the ELP, or an adaptation of it, in your teaching? If so, how do you incorporate it into your lessons?

### *3.3. Data Analysis and Credibility Measures*

In the course of analyzing the data, the researcher read through the written responses several times to identify the most prominent attitudes expressed by the participants (Hatch, 2002). Based on this analysis, initial conclusions were drawn, and member checks were employed (Merriam, 2002) in order to confirm the researcher's interpretations of the responses. In order to verify the appropriateness of the findings, debriefing by a colleague who was not involved with the project was utilized (Creswell, 2007).

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The results are discussed below in terms of the research questions. In order to safeguard the anonymity of the participants, they are referred to as Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively.

### *4.1. Awareness of the Concepts of Plurilingualism and Pluriculturalism*

Although researchers such as Doğançay-Aktuna and Kızıltepe (2005) and Güler (2005) have underscored the MoNE's objective of incorporating the principles of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in Turkey's foreign language curriculum, none of the participants had any familiarity with these terms; nor had they been exposed to them during the course of any teacher training or teacher development programs. On the other hand, after reviewing the definitions provided, Participant #1 acknowledged that these skills are "important, as we live in a global world." Participant #3 echoed this belief, adding that "the [English language] curriculum should also be global;" while Participant #4 felt that intercultural competence would help "make the students close to other cultures."

### *4.2. Perceptions Concerning the Applicability of Plurilingualism and Pluriculturalism in the Turkish Context*

In terms of the applicability of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in the Turkish educational context, Participant #5 stressed that these concepts are "not suitable," and that, as a primary school teacher, she did not see a place for them, noting that "it's difficult to apply them in the current curriculum." However, while the other participants agreed that the compulsory EFL curriculum used in Turkey's state-run schools does nothing to promote plurilingual or pluricultural values, Participant #1, in particular, expressed that "as there are different kinds of societies," more of an effort should be made to incorporate these principles into the English language teaching curriculum. Participant #4 also granted that "they are applicable," but believed that "there aren't any studies so far." This point, which was reiterated by Participant #3, counters the position of Doğançay-Aktuna and Kızıltepe (2005) and Mirici (2008) that the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence has been prioritized by the MoNE; on the contrary, it appears that little attention is currently being given to the issue on a curricular or institutional level.

### *4.3. Efforts to Implement Plurilingual and Pluricultural Skills in the Classroom*

In spite of the perceived lack of curricular support for developing plurilingual and pluricultural skills, some of the respondents did indicate that they made an effort to promote intercultural competence in the course of their teaching. Participant #4 expressed that she took advantage of "teaching texts and class projects" to discuss culture in the classroom, while Participant #3 took a more proactive stance, engaging her students in "class projects [as well as] European projects" to familiarize them with cultural issues.

Among the respondents, only Participant #1 acknowledged that “I don’t do anything” to address intercultural awareness.

#### 4.4. *Integration of the European Language Portfolio into Language Instruction*

Although Mirici (2008) points out that a Turkish adaptation of the European Language Portfolio has been made available to all Turkish citizens through the MoNE website, not all of the participants were aware of its existence. Of the two who were familiar with it, Participant #3, in particular, was favorably inclined toward its use in the EFL classroom, noting that it “makes a great contribution to language learning,” in support of the claim by the *CEFR* that the ELP is highly beneficial in terms of facilitating language learning activities (CoE, 2011). She went on to explain that she frequently made use of the ELP, although she accessed it “through some European projects on the eTwinning portal,” rather than utilizing the Turkish version available on the MoNE website. Participant #5 also reported that she was active on the eTwinning site, which is accessible at <http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm> and allows institutions, as well as individual classroom teachers, from Europe and beyond to join in collaborative cross-cultural projects meant to raise awareness of diversity and to promote international cooperation (Comenius, n.d.).

### 5. Conclusion

Because this study was limited in terms of the number of respondents, it is not possible to generalize the results to a larger population of elementary-level language instructors in Turkey. However, because all English language instructors employed in state-run Turkish schools are exposed to similar teacher training and development programs, it is possible to assume that the experiences and knowledge of the participants are commensurate with that of their peers. Therefore, based on the overall lack of awareness of the respondents concerning plurilingualism and pluriculturalism and the perceived absence of sufficient resources for developing these skills, it can be concluded that, in spite of the MoNE’s stated goals of promoting conditions favorable to the teaching and learning of these competences, the current circumstances in Turkey do very little to advance this objective.

However, it can also be seen that, on the whole, the participants were favorable toward developing intercultural awareness in their students, with several of them making individual efforts to do so despite the perceived inadequacies of the current curriculum and their lack of familiarity with the MoNE adaptation of the ELP. In light of these findings, it is clear that further research on a larger scale is necessary in order to determine the extent of the understanding (or lack thereof) shared by Turkey’s foreign language instructors concerning the concepts of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism and their implications in terms of language learning and to identify the steps that are required to ensure that the educational goals concerning foreign language education that have been set by the MoNE and the Council of Europe are reached.

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## Appendix A. Definitions of Plurilingualism, Pluriculturalism and the European Language Portfolio

### A.1. Plurilingualism:

According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR)*, plurilingualism refers to the ability of a person who is competent in more than one language to switch from one language code to another in order to communicate effectively in a particular set of circumstances (CoE, 2001). Unlike bilingual contexts, where one language is often viewed as superior or more prestigious than the other, plurilingualism entails that no one language code is given more importance than the others (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009). Furthermore, plurilingualism should not be confused with multilingualism, which refers to a situation in which more than one language is used within a specific geographic area. Examples of plurilingualism can be seen in regions of Spain, where Catalan is commonly spoken in addition to Castilian Spanish (Coste et al., 2009).

### A.2. Pluriculturalism:

Pluriculturalism is considered to be a consequence of plurilingualism. According to the *CEFR*, pluriculturalism develops when “linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness,” enabling the individual “to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences” (CoE, 2001, p.43). As a result, the individual is able to navigate successfully across a range of cultural contexts, and in doing so, develops a new and unique identity which is not constrained by a single cultural perspective (Coste et al., 2009).

### A.3. European Language Portfolio:

In order to put the objectives of the *CEFR* concerning plurilingual and pluricultural competence into practice, the European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed as a concrete teaching resource which can be used to coordinate language learning activities (CoE, 2011). Based on the belief that successful mastery of language skills depends in large part on learner autonomy, the ELP serves as an ongoing record of language learning, encouraging learners to document their own progress. While format of the ELP varies based on the adaptations of the individual countries in which it is implemented, the typical portfolio consists of a “language biography” or “language passport” (CoE, 2011, p. 4) where learners can record their linguistic and cultural experiences; a dossier for keeping documents and other materials related to these experiences; and a self-assessment checklist (Mirici, 2008).

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